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ABSTRACT

Although informal reading inventories are widely used, they are not without their shortcomings, regardless of whether they have been published commercially or have been constructed by the teacher. There are at least two significant weaknesses in inventories developed by the teacher: (1) passages selected randomly from the graded basal readers that may or may not be on the level suggested by a publisher, and (2) the types of questions written for them, usually at the memory level of cognition. Published inventories also have their weaknesses, such as the discrepancy between the grade levels assigned to the reading selections by the publishers and their readability levels. Another questionable feature of published inventories is the procedure used for their administration, with students directed to read one selection silently and a different one orally. Because the task of developing a good informal inventory is so complicated, teachers, if they must construct their own, should select several random passages, identify four selections for each grade level from one through ten, and use a modified version of the Fry Readability Graph--extended to determine the difficulty levels of the paragraphs chosen. Introducing teachers to a new format for published inventories is also helpful. Among its new features would be (1) a complete step-by-step procedure for administration, (2) four forms at each grade level, and (3) a readability level for each of the four selections for every grade that is close to the beginning of the grade level for which it is written. (HOD)

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Informal Reading Inventories--A New Format

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Informal Reading Inventories--A New Format

One of the most popular assessment instruments in the field of reading education seems to be the informal reading inventory. For years, reading specialists, as well as classroom teachers, have utilized it when they have attempted to determine the reading problems and reading levels of the children they want to help.

Even though informal reading inventories are widely used, they are not without their shortcomings, regardless of whether they have been published or have been constructed by the teacher.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the more glaring weaknesses of popular informal inventories, to suggest ways by which teachers may enhance the value of the inventories they construct themselves, and to introduce them to a new inventory format that has been designed to eliminate most of the weaknesses found in inventories that are presently being used.

Weaknesses in Popular Inventories

There are two popular reading inventories available to classroom teachers and reading specialists today. The first one is the inventory that is developed by the teacher.

For years, teachers have been misguided by some professors when they are taught that they can randomly select a series of paragraphs from basal readers, one at each grade level, write some questions, and presto, they will have a valid inventory. There are at least two significant weaknesses in inventories developed in this fashion.

One of those weaknesses comes from the practice of randomly selecting passages from the so-called graded basal readers. This procedure is very questionable. Justification for such a conclusion comes from a number of carefully-done studies of the readability of popular basal series. Those analyses have indicated that there is so much variance in the difficulty of

randomly-selected passages in a given basal reading text that teachers cannot trust a randomly selected passage from a reading text to be on the grade level indicated by the publishers. For example, the assessed readability of a large number of passages, selected at random from the Primer Book in one of the most widely-used basal-reader series, indicated a range in difficulty from low first-grade through the sixth-grade level. Furthermore, passages were found to vary in readability from grade one through grade ten in the first four levels in the series.

To procure additional data for the study, a number of the teachers who actually try to use the same series in their classes were asked to judge the appropriateness of the text for their students. Without a single exception, they felt that the materials were too difficult for most of their children.

Random selections, therefore, can not be assumed to be on the difficulty level indicated by the publishers, merely because they are taken from basal textbooks. If teachers do make such assumptions, they will surely put together some misleading, inadequate informal reading inventories.

A second weakness in teacher-made inventories can be found by analyzing the types of questions usually written for them.

Without too much explanation about how they should do it, this writer often asks university students to go to one of the basal series in the reading center, randomly select a 100-150 word passage for two different, stipulated grade levels, and write five comprehension questions for each one. The students are told that they are gathering materials to go into an informal inventory. When their assignments are turned in, a careful analysis of their work is done and, usually, the passages they have selected, as well as the questions they have written, are inappropriate. The activity is designed to help future teachers understand just how to develop a worthwhile informal inventory, in the event they must make one. By requiring them to go through this assignment, they can see that one cannot trust a randomly

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selected passage to be on the level suggested by a publisher. They also learn that the questions for informal inventories are usually written at the memory level of cognition.

The second type of inventory used by reading teachers is the published variety. Even though this inventory is published and must be purchased, it, too, has some significant weaknesses and teachers should be aware of them.

One questionable feature of these inventories are the grade levels that have been assigned to the reading selections. Serious analyses of the paragraphs in two popular published inventories have found, using the same readability formula reportedly used to grade them, that the readability levels of most of the paragraphs were not on the grade levels assigned to them by the publishers. Tables I and II contain the data that were revealed in the analyses.

Table I

Author's Grade	Form	Actual Fry Grade	Variance in Years
1	A	1	•
	B	1	•
	C	1	•
2	A	M2	+.5
	B	M2	+.5
	C	1	•
3	A	L4	+.5
	B	M2	-.5
	C	L4	+.5
4	A	L4	•
	B	M4	+.5
	C	M3	-.5
5	A	L6	+1.0
	B	L6	+1.0
	C	L6	+1.0
6	A	L7	+1.0
	B	M5	-.5
	C	M6	+.5
7	A	M6	-.5
	B	M7	+.5
	C	M7	+1.0
8	A	M7	-.5
	B	M7	-.5
	C	M7	-.5

Table II

Authors' Grade	Form	Actual Fry Grade	Variance in Years
4	A	M4	.5
	B	H3	-.5
	C	M4	+.5
	D	M5	+1.5
5	A	L5	•
	B	H4	-.5
	C	L6	+1.0
	D	M6	+1.5
6	A	M6	+.5
	B	M7	+1.5
	C	L5	-1.0
	D	H6	+1.0
7	A	H7	+1.0
	B	H7	+1.0
	C	H7	+1.0
	D	M6	-.5
8	A	H7	-.5
	B	H6	-1.0
	C	M8	+.5
	D	L8	•
9	A	H8	-.5
	B	H7	-1.5
	C	M8	-.5
	D	H7	-1.5
10	A	M10	+.5
	B	H7	-2.5
	C	H10	+1.0
	D	M9	-.5
11	A	H10	-.5
	B	L8	-2.5
	C	L13	+2.5
	D	L11	•
12	A	H9	-2.5
	B	H12	+1.0
	C	M11	-.5
	D	M13	+1.5

Prior to the analyses, it was determined that the readability of graded passages in an inventory should be near the beginning of each grade level. It was, therefore, against this criterion that the difficulty levels of the published paragraphs were compared.

Table I exhibits the data generated in the analysis of one of the published inventories. They show that

1. 6.7 percent of the selections in this inventory are <u>on</u> the difficulty level designated by the publishers,
2. 40.0 percent of the selections are <u>below</u> the difficulty level designated by the publishers, and,

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3. 53.3 percent of the selections are above the grade level designated by the publishers.

Since approximately 93.3 percent of the reading selections in the first inventory are not on the grade level designated by the publisher, it is felt that an assessment based on it would probably be less than accurate.

Table II contains data that were generated on a second popular published inventory. They, too, reveal factors that should be of interest to teachers of reading.

1. 8.3 percent of the selections in the inventory are on the difficulty level designated by the publisher,
2. 47.2 percent of the selections are below the difficulty level designated by the publisher, and,
3. 44.4 percent of the selections are above the difficulty level designated by the publisher.

This analysis indicates that 91.7 percent of the selections analyzed were not on the grade level designated by the publisher. Due to the presence of so many discrepances, it would be very difficult to accurately identify a student's true reading ability levels using this instrument.

A second questionable feature of published inventories is the procedure used for their administration.

In the first place, they utilize one selection for silent reading and a completely different one for oral reading. Reading specialists, as well as good reading teachers, have known for years that one should never require a child to read an unfamiliar piece of writing to an audience until he has first had an opportunity to read it to himself.

In the second place, those inventories assess part of a reader's comprehension based on his oral reading. In most cases, if a student (even the average, or better, reader) is called upon to read an unfamiliar selection orally, he usually gets "up tight" because he is so concerned with pleasing the teacher, or

with not making an idiot out of himself and having the other students laugh at him, that he doesn't pay much attention to what he is reading and his comprehension on the material is less than adequate. If it is poor pedagogy to require good readers to read unfamiliar material orally before they have had an opportunity to read it silently, it makes even less sense to have a retarded reader read an unfamiliar selection orally, before he has had an opportunity to read it silently, especially if his comprehension is going to be checked.

Thirdly, the popular published reading inventories fail to offer the proper administrative procedures to enable the examiner to know, for sure, whether, or not, a given grade level represents a particular reading level for the student. The following hypothetical situation occasionally happens to teachers who use an inadequate inventory with a retarded reader.

In this situation, the examiner is giving a popular published inventory to a youngster. He successfully reads two or three of the graded selections, but then comes to one that gives him grief. His comprehension is below an acceptable level and he makes too many oral-reading errors. Due to the absence of any procedure to either prove, or disprove, her opinion, the examiner concludes that this particular selection represents the reader's frustration level. However, just for the heck of it, she hands him the next higher-level selection and asks him to read it. He reads the selection well, answers all of the related comprehension questions, and makes only a few minor oral-reading errors.

One might ask, "what happened?" The answer is obvious. He had not reached his frustration level on the previous passage. However, because of the poorly designed materials the examiner was using, she had no way of either proving or disproving it. If the inventory she had used had contained at least one equivalent selection at each grade level, and if the directions for administration had offered a procedure for using an equivalent

selection, she could have seen that his problem was probably related to his lack of interest in the story rather than to the readability of the material.

Enhancing the Worth of Teacher-Constructed Inventories.

Because the task of developing a good informal inventory is so complicated, when done properly, it is not recommended that teachers try to construct their own. However, if they must construct their own, it is suggested that they consider the following recommendations:

First of all, they should randomly select several passages of 100-150 words of continuous writing from each of the so-called graded basals and carefully assess them for readability using an appropriate readability formula.

Secondly, from those random selections, they should identify four selections for each grade level from one through ten, or higher. Each set of four selections for a grade level should be as close to the same readability level as it is possible to find them and should be near the low side of the grade level for which they are to be used. The first two forms at each grade level will be used to identify a reader's Free-Reading, Teaching/Learning, and Frustration levels and the last two forms at each grade level will be used to identify his Potential Level.

It is recommended that teachers use a modified version of the Fry Readability Graph--Extended to determine the difficulty levels of the paragraphs chosen.

When passages that are on the correct readability level have been selected, and referenced, at least five good comprehension questions (on different levels of cognition) should be written for each passage.

The types of oral-reading errors to be marked, a symbol system for quickly marking them, and a summary sheet for data retrieval should be adopted and used as part of the inventory.

A New Format for Informal Inventories

The concept for an informal reading inventory has been an excellent idea since it was first introduced many years ago. The model, as it was conceived, however popular it has been, is not without its weaknesses and has been in need of some modifications since it was first introduced.

Since several of the major weaknesses inherent in teacher-made, as well as published inventories, have been cited and briefly discussed, teachers should be introduced to a new informal inventory design which, when properly utilized, will eliminate most of the weaknesses found in other inventories.

To quickly and succinctly describe the new format for the informal inventory, its design and the ways by which it corrects for the weaknesses already discussed, are presented as follows:

First of all, the inventory consists of two separate books. The first one is the examiner's copy. It contains a complete step-by-step procedure for its administration, a copy of all paragraphs with appropriate comprehension questions, charts showing the types of oral-reading errors to be marked, and a symbol system for marking them. The second book is the student's copy. It is the one from which the student reads and contains only the paragraphs themselves;

Secondly, the inventory contains four forms at each grade level. They are equivalent in every way in which it is possible to locate them, or to write them. Each selection is written about a different area of interest to children;

Thirdly, each of the four selections for every grade has a readability level that is close to the beginning of the grade level for which it is written. This characteristic insures that there will be approximately one grade level of difficulty between any passage the student might read and the one that comes below it or above it;

Fourthly, the questions that appear after each selection in the examiner's book are written at different levels of cognition and are parenthetically identified by comprehension type for easy scoring and record keeping;

Fifthly, the reader's comprehension is assessed on his silent reading only, as it should be; and, his oral-reading errors are identified when he is reading a selection that he has just read silently;

Sixthly, there are equivalent selections which permit the examiner to either prove, or disprove, the student's reading ability at each grade level. If a reader seems to frustrate at a particuliar grade level, the examiner can move him to an equivalent selection, at the same grade level, to determine whether or not it was his lack of interest in the topic, or the difficulty-level of the material, that kept him from reading it at least at his Teaching/Learning level;

Seventhly, there is a criteria chart (i.e., a chart indicating the maximum comprehension and oral reading errors allowable for the Teaching/Learning Level for each separate paragraph) following the comprehension questions in the examiner's book. This chart makes the scoring procedure much easier and quicker for the examiner;

Eighthly, the reading selections in the examiner's book are laminated for ease of use by the examiner. When her paragraphs are laminated, she is able to mark all oral-reading and comprehension errors with an overlay marker as the student reads and then clear the page for subsequent use once the pertinent data have been retrieved for the summary sheet; and

Ninthly, there is a well-designed summary sheet containing spaces for all of the information generated by the assessment, plus additional spaces for other data that are needed to complete the student's diagnostic report.

This inventory format has been conceived, developed, and tested through many years of use in clinics and public-school classrooms and is recommended to teachers and diagnosticians.